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Department
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Prepared by the
DHS Office of
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Monday, October 6, 2008

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Coping with the cold

Posted by Gabrielle Russon | Kalamazoo Gazette October 04, 2008 06:00AM

Settlement from woman's tragic death pays utility bills for others

KALAMAZOO -- When Jann LoshBaugh fell behind on her electric bill, she had to make a decision -- buy food or pay her bill.

The Kalamazoo resident skipped paying her September bill, and a shut-off notice appeared in the mail 10 days later.

"I was embarrassed," said LoshBaugh, 58, who lives on a fixed income and receives disability checks. "If I could've paid everything, I would have paid everything."

It's a common story, experts say, of people struggling to pay gas and electric bills as prices for power, food and other necessities continue to rise in a down economy.

"We always say, 'This year the perfect storm is coming,'" said Christian Borg, who works for the Community Action Bureau. "All these factors contribute to a growing crisis."

GETTING HELP

Food, fuel and natural gas prices are rising, and the economy is down, resulting in more people struggling to pay heating bills, experts say.

Here's are some resources for help.

- Contact your gas or electric company to apply for the state's [Winter Protection Plan](#). The program is for low-income families or those 65 and older. It prohibits power shut-offs between Dec. 1 and March 31.
- If you have an emergency -- from a low propane tank to a power shut-off or rent eviction -- call the **Kalamazoo County Department of Human Services** at 337-4900.
- Call 373-5173 for the Kalamazoo Area Agency on Aging's information and assistance program. It can provide financial assistance to those age 60 and older.
- Call 373-5066 for the **Community Action Bureau**. The bureau has a free weatherization program for those who meet income requirements. In Kalamazoo County, the agency helps about 120 households each year. The bureau also provides emergency help, giving up to \$1,000 to seniors or people with disabilities.
- Call 344-6119 to learn more about the **Salvation Army's heating-assistance program**.
- Call 649-2901 for **South County Community Services**, which provides emergency financial assistance. It is only for those living in Prairie Ronde, Schoolcraft, Brady, Wakeshma, Pavilion and Climax Townships or who have children in the Schoolcraft, Climax or Vicksburg school districts.

Several agencies in Kalamazoo County are trying to help, including the Kalamazoo Area Agency on Aging and South

County Community Services. A \$127,250 payment from Indiana Michigan Power that was part a settlement between the power company and the state of Michigan over the death of a 90-year-old Vicksburg woman last December was split between the two agencies.

Phyllis Willett died of pneumonia days after a social worker found her in her unheated Vicksburg home. In the settlement, the power company acknowledged it failed to properly notify Willett about the shutoff.

With the settlement money, the Area Agency on Aging paid \$18,000 worth of gas and electric bills for 24 local households this summer. Most recipients were at least 60 years old, director Judy Sivak said.

For LoshBaugh, who received \$137 to avoid a power shut-off, it was at least momentary relief.

"When you're disabled like I am, you only get so much money," she said. "I was about ready to give up."

With its share of the settlement, South County Community Services spent \$5,561 to refill propane tanks and pay power bills for 42 families that had received shut-off notices this year.

It was badly needed money -- especially since rising natural gas prices are hurting more families, said Emily Greenman, South County's coordinator of adult and family programs.

"We're trying to make it last as long as possible," she said.

Greenman said the additional funds will allow South County to add an extra \$5,000 in its budget for emergencies each year until about 2016.

Other steps are being taken, meanwhile, to ward off tragedies such as Willett's.

Indiana Michigan Power has bolstered employee training about warning signs, such as missed payments or an unkempt house, spokesman David Mayne said. "If they see something that raises a question in their mind, we want our employees to have the training to report that situation."

Sivak said her agency is pushing seniors to register for the state's Winter Protection Plan, which prohibits power shut-offs for those age 65 and over between Dec. 1 and March 31.

She also encourages seniors to request third-party notification from their power company, which sends a copy of their monthly bill to a friend or relative.

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October 6, 2008

Voters must register by today

By LIZ SHEPARD
Times Herald

Anyone wishing to cast a ballot Nov. 4 only has a few hours left to register.

The deadline to have a say in the historic presidential election is today.

"This is a very important election, you know, and you have to be registered to vote," said Fort Gratiot Township Clerk Robert Crawford. "A lot of people only vote for the presidential election, and here's your chance. This is a history-making election. You have the possibility of...voting for the first black president or the first female vice president."

Registration can be completed at a city or township clerk's office or by visiting a Secretary of State branch. It also can be done at the county clerk office, but St. Clair County Clerk Marilyn Dunn said it's timelier to register with the local municipal clerk because her office sends the paperwork to them anyway.

The Department of Human Services, the Department of Community Health and the Department of Career Development also offer voter-registration services.

Voters also can visit the Secretary of State Web site and download a registration form that can be mailed in, but it must be received by a municipal clerk by the end of today, Crawford said.

Anyone who registered to vote through the mail must cast their ballot in person, St. Clair County Clerk Marilyn Dunn said.

Anyone who is a first-time voter and registered by mail also must cast their ballot in person, Dunn said.

But not everyone has to head to the polls to make their voice heard.

Voters can apply for an absentee ballot if they are at least 60 years old, are physically unable to go to the polls alone, are a precinct worker at a location other than their residence, will not be in the community election day, or are in jail awaiting arraignment or trial.

Requests for an absentee ballot must be mailed by 2 p.m. the Saturday before the election.

Voters also can request a ballot before 4 p.m. the day before the election. The ballot has to be filled out at the municipal clerk's office.

Voters who recently moved or changed their names must update their voter registration, Crawford said.



KALAMAZOO GAZETTE

Flood cleanup resources available

Sunday, October 05, 2008

Kalamazoo

Gazette Staff Reports

KALAMAZOO -- The American Red Cross had assisted more than 200 Kalamazoo-area residents affected by mid-September's severe flooding as of early last week, according to Tom Sivak, Red Cross director of emergency services.

Numerous other agencies and businesses in Kalamazoo County are offering assistance to those affected by the flooding. Some require home visits or have other requirements.

Energy/Utilities

v Department of Human Services, 337-4900 (a starting point to receive relief from the state; housing, financial assistance, food stamps, state emergency relief applications for heating assistance).

v Salvation Army, 344-6119 (emergency financial assistance, food, clothing and personal care items).

v Community Action Agency, 373-5066 (emergency financial assistance and, for people 60 and over, housing weatherization program).

v Consumers Energy,

(800) 982-0958.

Housing

v Housing Resources Inc.,

382-0287.

Medical/Prescriptions

v Family Health Center, 349-2641.

v Portage Community Center, 323-1942 (emergency food, prescription needs).

v Free Health Clinic of

Kalamazoo, 344-0044.

v Lending Hands of Michigan, 567-4381 (lends medical equipment free of charge).

Other Agencies

v Christian Resource Center, 388-5054.

v Mt. Zion Baptist Church, 388-3111.

v Servpro Damage Cleanup, 342-2911 (free tips on water removal, mold mitigation).

v St. Ann Catholic Church, 731-0294.

v St. Joseph Catholic Church, 343-6256.

v St. Vincent De Paul, 388-4544.

v Senior Services, 382-0515.

v Comstock Community Center, 345-8556 (must live in Comstock Township or attend Comstock Community Schools).

Anyone interested in donating or volunteering their services for those affected by the flood may call the Red Cross at 353-6180, visit www.greaterkzooredcross.org or go to the office at 5640 Venture Court, Kalamazoo.

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Monday, October 6, 2008

Project gives needy access to produce

Michigan Bridge Card can be used at 18 farmers' markets.

By Jennifer Youssef

Buying fresh fruits and vegetables has been a challenge the past several years for low-income Michigan residents who rely on food stamps and face limited access to grocers and transportation.

But shopping for locally grown tomatoes, corn, apples and pears has gotten easier for scores of families, thanks to efforts to expand the use of the Michigan Bridge Card, a debit card that has replaced traditional food stamps, at farmers' markets.

Some 18 farmers' markets in Michigan, including Eastern Market in Detroit, now accept the Bridge Card for fresh fruit and vegetable purchases. Shoppers use the card, which is loaded with a set amount of money, to withdraw tokens from an ATM-like device at the market to make purchases. Michigan has more farmers' markets participating in the electronic program than any other Midwestern state.

That's a win-win for both Michigan families and farmers.

Residents have access to a cornucopia of fresh Michigan fruits and vegetables, and it's a boost to the state's agriculture industry, giving farmers more customers and potentially pumping millions of dollars into the economy. More than 1 million Michigan residents receive an average of \$100 each month on the card for food.

"It allows people who are on food assistance to buy farm-fresh produce, which is usually less expensive than a grocery store, and from the farmers' standpoint, it expands their market," said Randall Fogelman, Eastern Market's director of special projects.

The federal government has mandated that all states use such cards for assistance benefits instead of paper coupons. The state Dept. of Human Services administers the Michigan Bridge Card.

Besides working to expand access to farmers' markets, the farmers' group has launched a nutrition information and community outreach program at Metro Detroit grocery stores to teach consumers how to eat healthier.

Allowing residents on public assistance to tap their Bridge Cards to pay for fresh fruits and vegetables has boosted sales at Detroit's Eastern Market, Fogelman said.

Some vendors at the market began accepting the Bridge Cards in July 2007. At the end of the first year, weekly sales from the Bridge Card averaged \$715, and total Bridge Card sales for the six months amounted to \$36,484.

"It's incredibly positive," Fogelman said. "It makes the market accessible for everyone."

Creating greater market access, especially for residents who have difficulty finding fresh fruit and vegetables at the scant markets in the city, is a priority for the Eastern Market Corp., the organization that runs and promotes the market. Of the market's 125 or so vendors, 50 now accept tokens, up from 14 last year, he said.

Only vendors who sell produce are allowed to accept tokens. Tokens can only be used for fruit and vegetables. Farmers cash in the tokens with Eastern Market Corp. The state reimburses the group.

Jerome Blaszak, owner of Blaszak Greenhouse in Willis, is among them. He said he is happy to sell the beans, tomatoes, squash, cabbage and other produce he grows to buyers on assistance. He has sold to 25 or so low-income customers in the few Saturdays he has been at the market this season.

"I like being able to feed the people," he said.

Find this article at:

<http://www.detroitnews.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20081006/BIZ/810060332>

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October 5, 2008

Three counties get funds \$625,000 to build up early learning programs

By *DAWN PARKER*
Staff Writer

EAST LANSING - If the next generation is to succeed - and help Michigan grow - their education has to start young.

That conviction by several area grant-making organizations has given life to the "Ingham Birth to Five Great Start" program.

It was launched Sept. 10 at the East Lansing Public Library with a \$625,000 grant from the Capital Region Community Foundation, the Capital Area United Way and the R.E. Olds Foundation.

"This partnership is going to make a lasting, positive impact upon the youth of our community," said Dennis Fliehman, CRCF president and CEO.

Fliehman hopes Wednesday's kickstart will spur the raising of another \$625,000 from other mid-Michigan grant-makers.

Ingham County will receive the bulk of the money. Michelle Nicholson, the county's Great Start Collaborative coordinator, said funds will be used in a variety of ways to benefit young children and their families.

Those efforts might include playgroups to foster parent-child interaction, parent education, home visits, coaching for teachers and child-care providers in early childhood programs and support of oral and dental health.

"We have many children and their parents who don't have dental coverage, and are really in need of dental care and treatment," Nicholson said.

Clinton and Eaton counties will each get \$10,000 per year for the next three years for their Imagination Library literacy program, which provides a book every month for children from birth until their fifth birthday.

Karen Black, early childhood project coordinator for Clinton County RESA, said the money will provide books for 330 additional children each year. About 121 children are currently being served by the program.

"It's a great opportunity for us to really get the program up and going in Clinton County," Black said.

The Oakland Press (theoaklandpress.com), Serving Oakland County

Opinion

State should put priority on tracking sex offenders

Sunday, October 5, 2008 12:29 AM EDT

By The Oakland Press

There are reportedly about 1,100 unaccounted-for sex offenders in Michigan and the Michigan State Police says they're not actively trying to track them down.

This isn't good, especially because other statistics indicate that 48 percent of 525 will return to prison eventually.

According to officials, most of those returning to incarceration will be for reasons other than committing new crimes.

But if one innocent person is another victim of a roaming, unmonitored sex offender, than that's one too many.

We understand that budgets are tight and there is not enough money and resources to do everything law officers would like to do. But that shouldn't stop officials from placing a priority on tracking these potentially dangerous individuals. We know keeping track of these people is not easy but we're talking, in many cases, about individuals who have committed some pretty serious sex crimes. We have to wonder if there might be some misplaced priorities in the state budget and administration of our prison and judicial system. No one would want to see a police officer continue to ticket someone for running a stop sign and ignore a burglary being committed at the same time. The analogy may not be quite accurate but it seems to apply when we hear about so many sex offenders freely roaming our streets. Stronger controls and more supervision of hard core pedophiles, rapists and other sex crime offenders is just common sense if the individuals are released back into society.

Why this isn't occurring is a mystery. As we've said, finances and budgets are tight but there's also something called priorities.

Convicted sex offenders must be a top priority of our judicial system. Those who are rightly convicted of sex crimes must be locked up for many years. If they happen to earn a release, they still need to be monitored very closely and money to do so should be made available.

Protecting society from repeat sex offenders should be a priority and a major focus of this goal should also include better monitoring of those who are out of prison.

URL: <http://www.theoaklandpress.com/articles/2008/10/04/opinion/doc48e7615c78605798102911.prt>

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Sunday, October 5, 2008

Editorial

Give businesses relief from 22% tax surcharge

Detnews.com

For months, Michigan businesses have been chafing under the burden of a surcharge on the state's business tax -- precisely what job providers don't need as they confront the wrenching effects of a fundamental restructuring of the auto industry. Now, the state Senate has promised some relief, and the House of Representatives should follow suit.

The Michigan Senate last week voted to accelerate the phase-out of the surcharge on the business tax, which currently could stretch until 2016. The Senate legislation would reduce the surcharge to 14.66 percent from 21.99 percent next year and to 7.33 percent in 2010. It would be eliminated for the 2011 tax year.

The surcharge was added to the Michigan Business Tax last year after an uproar over the effects of a sales tax on certain services caused it to be repealed. The Michigan Business Tax was also adopted last year to replace the state's much-hated Single Business Tax.

The primary problem with the Single Business Tax was that it was effectively a tax on jobs -- every new job a firm added caused its Single Business Tax liability to increase.

The base of the Michigan Business Tax is a combination of gross receipts and business income. The state also eliminated a state property tax on business equipment.

The surcharge covers the projected revenue loss from the business equipment tax and the state's generous movie-making tax credit and some other tax adjustments.

But if you raise a new tax to replace the tax revenues you are cutting, you're not really providing tax relief.

As Michigan Senate Finance Committee Chairwoman Nancy Cassis, R-Novi, noted in a statement, the major complaint of business owners in hearings by a subcommittee on the impact of the new business tax was the \$660 million surcharge.

The phase-out could cost the state budget \$333 million next year. The shortfall could easily be made up if the Legislature adopted even a few of the changes recommended last month by Detroit Renaissance in its study of state spending.

Raising the health care contribution of state employees to the national average, it noted, could have saved between \$88 million and \$219 million in the 2007 state budget.

Changing sentencing guidelines and sentencing practices so Michigan's prison stays matched those of other Great Lakes states could save an estimated \$403 million. Sentencing nonviolent offenders to prison alternatives could yield additional millions of dollars.

Similar savings are available if relatively minor changes are made to the state's welfare and Medicaid programs, the report suggests.

Michigan businesses should pay a fair share of taxes, but loading a 22 percent surcharge on them as they struggle with a six-year recession, high unemployment and now uncertainty in the national economy is not a good way to encourage new jobs and investment in this state. The Senate legislation, coupled with adoption of the suggestions for budget savings in the Detroit Renaissance report, is a reasonable approach to providing real tax relief for struggling Michigan firms.